
Inscribing Identity: Insights for Teaching From ESL Students' Journals

Jenny Miller

Linguistic minority students in schools must acquire and operate in a second language while negotiating mainstream texts and content areas, along with negotiating an emerging new sense of social identity. This article presents journal data from an Australian ethnographic study that explored the relationship between second-language use, textual practices in school, and the representation of identity. Such texts normally lie outside dominant school discourses, but for students they are a powerful means of negotiating identity and gaining vital language practice. For teachers journals provide critical insights into the experiences of their students and into their developing language competence.

Les élèves qui forment une minorité linguistique à l'école doivent acquérir une langue seconde et fonctionner dans cette langue en même temps qu'ils assimilent de la matière académique dans la langue dominante et se construisent une nouvelle identité sociale. Cet article présente des données de journaux personnels provenant d'une étude ethnographique en Australie portant sur le rapport entre l'usage d'une langue seconde, les pratiques textuelles à l'école et la représentation de l'identité. Ce genre de textes ne fait habituellement pas partie du discours pédagogique dominant; pourtant, ces textes représentent pour les élèves un puissant moyen de négocier leur identité et de pratiquer leurs habiletés langagières. Les journaux personnels fournissent aux enseignants un aperçu important des expériences de leurs élèves et du développement de leurs compétences langagières.

Introduction

One of the most critical realities of contemporary education in a globalized world is the growing cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity in schools and the difficulties involved in educating and empowering vast numbers of students who do not speak the majority language. Giving a voice to immigrant and refugee students, many of whom are from deprived and traumatized backgrounds (Rutter, 2006), is an extraordinary challenge for teachers and schools today. The acquisition of a new language is closely tied to social identity, textual practices in school contexts, and in many cases the subordination of language and text varieties that lie outside the dominant discourses in schools. Tied to the identity work of these students is the development of communicative competence in a range of discourses and

genres. In this article I look at the importance of journal-writing for high school ESL students and their teachers. I argue that student journals are an exemplary genre for learning to write and for self-representation and that they have great potential for learning by both students and teachers.

For teachers the journals provide insights not only into the developing language competence of their ESL students, but also into their experiences, identities, feelings, needs, and perceptions. The journals thus become a means both of accessing students' voices—while scaffolding the development of language competence meaningfully—and of providing important cues for student-centered pedagogy. For students journals offer a powerful and nonthreatening means of representing and renegotiating their identities, along with a way to practice and experiment with written forms of English. Reflective journals can draw on autobiographical material (Wajnryb, 2003) and so are often used for ESL students in the early phases of their language-learning, but such journals can also continue to be used beyond arrival as a means to connect with the curriculum, to reflect on learning processes, and to recycle the language needed for mainstream subjects. I use the term *student journals* to describe a range of writing genres and processes, including personal narratives, stories, and responses to text. The key is that reflective writing done in a special diary or journal privileges the writer's voice and gives it both purpose and value in academic contexts.

Identity and Discourse: Insights From a Sociocultural Frame

Before outlining the context and presenting data from ESL student journals, I present some of the key arguments in both identity theory and a sociocultural framing of language use, and clarify the importance of reflective writing in communicative language teaching practices. I also argue that the value of such teaching and learning extends beyond ESL teachers and students in intensive language programs to mainstream pedagogy, curriculum, and learning. In addition, I suggest that there are implications for teacher education (Kroll, 2003).

The link between discourse and identity is a core assumption of critical sociocultural theory, with identity conceptualized as a process of continual emerging and becoming. Unitary labels and hard binary oppositions are rejected in favor of the concept of multiple identities, "points of temporary attachment" (Hall, 1996, p. 6), which are fluid, dynamic, contradictory, shifting, and contingent. Various constructions of identity in the literature have used a considerable diversity of terminology, including social identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, linguistic identity, sociocultural identity, subjectivity, the self, and voice (Miller, 2003). Hall has described identity as a key concept, "an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all" (p. 2). Some of these key questions concern cultural identity in globalized, multicultural, and multilingual contexts.

gual societies; agency; and the politics of speaking, equity, and access to education.

In the field of second-language research, the discursive construction of identity has been stressed by Norton (1997, 2000), McKay and Wong (1996), Miller (2003, 2004a), Tan (2006), and many others. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2003) highlight the inequities that emerge in contemporary multilingual societies where some languages and identities embody a great deal of capital and others are devalued. They also emphasize the narrative aspect of identity construction and negotiation and present research that validates identity narratives as a key to understanding the process of being and becoming that minority language groups undertake.

These discourse-based perspectives are reflected in recent writing and research that has highlighted the complex sociocultural contexts of ESL learners today (Goldstein, 2003; Hawkins, 2004; Miller, 2003, 2004b; Norton & Toohey, 2004) and the importance of identity in how languages are acquired and used. Hawkins provides many instances of the uptake of such perspectives in schools. For example, a sociocultural view of language acquisition implies teaching practices that

1. value the languages and cultures of linguistic minority students in ways that are both symbolic and tangible;
2. provide opportunities for students to use the target language and discourses;
3. allow the use of text types that reflect the social and academic lives of the students, embedding tasks in activities that connect students to their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds;
4. have a focus on metaknowledge, as well as metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness;
5. acknowledge and teach that ways of writing and reading are part of discursive practice that can help or constrain language development and learning (Miller, 2004b).

These practices are closely tied not only to any consideration of reflective writing processes in school, but also to new understandings of language pedagogy. Teaching practices such as those suggested above open the possibility of moving beyond common conceptions of communicative approaches to a more inclusive and empowering pedagogy, which I term a *transformative pedagogy of voice*.

From Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to a Transformative Pedagogy of Voice

The defining feature of a communicative approach in language pedagogy is perhaps that it focuses on meaning while using learners' identity as a primary resource, drawing on students' life stories, understandings, and experiences. That is, to make meaning, new content must be explicitly related

back to learners' experience. In ESL curricula, student journals are commonly used in early-phase programs, where students write simple autobiographical accounts using basic language. As they progress, students move from brief formulaic paragraphs to personal narratives. Wajnryb (2003) reminds us that personal narratives are one of the most naturalistic and motivating of all possible texts and that exposure to the possibility of reading and writing stories is potentially the best way to develop both human understanding and language proficiency. In regard to identity, Schiffrin (1996) demonstrates how narrative reveals aspects of the narrator's agency, his or her positioning in social contexts, and his or her display of social identity. But for students stories not only reveal agency, but also provide a forum actually to exercise agency and control in the learning context (Norton & Toohey, 2001, 2004).

There are two significant pedagogical benefits for the teacher as reader of students' stories. First, such stories allow access to the social, cultural, and linguistic resources of the student. They also provide opportunities for understanding, for the negotiation of meaning and sharing of texts, and for reflection on text. Dialogue journals in which teachers write a response to the student entry also provide a space for nonthreatening, authentic communication and mutual learning. Some studies of ESL journal-writing report increased motivation and fluency among students (Holmes & Moulton, 1997), but journals also allow teachers to gauge important aspects of literacy, without obsessive attention to what Rampton (1987) calls "the space between the speaker and his grammar" (p. 49). Second, stories provide a potential link between basic personal language and more complex literate forms; that is, they often reflect links between spoken interactions and written accounts of them, as can be seen in the example of Nora's (pseudonym) texts used below. Hammond and Macken Horarik (1999) remind us that although it is easy to advocate the importance of critical literacy, ESL students need time and the chance to walk before they run. They argue that the lead time toward critical literacy is far longer than is usually acknowledged, and before students can be critical, they must engage with text. For students with interrupted schooling, the time needed to achieve mainstream literacy can be up to 10 years (Garcia, 2000). This is far longer than the time suggested for ESL learners who already have first-language literacy and education (Collier, 1995).

Journal-writing, I suggest, provides an opportunity to engage with text in a way that maximizes both individual investment in learning and meaning-focused interaction between teachers and students. This investment and meaningfulness is often missing in common school genres and tasks. Valdes (2004) claims furthermore that teaching that focuses on the mechanics of production (grammar, vocabulary, organization, and generic structure) is missing the point that "writing is about ideas, that presentations are about ideas, and that when one engages in writing and speaking one also engages in a dialogue with others" (p. 122). She adds that students deserve to see

themselves as having something to say, which is connected to their teachers, classmates, and communities. This is part of “helping them to value their own voices” (p. 125), a notion that draws strongly on aspects of Freire’s (1995) emancipatory approach to education. For both the language and the mainstream classroom, valuing the student’s voice is also central to the participatory approach advocated by Auerbach (1995), transformative pedagogy advocated by Cummins (2000), borderline pedagogy (Giroux, 1992) or critical pedagogy (Pennycook, 2001). Central to all these approaches are texts that are “grounded in the lives of the students” (Cummins, p. 261). I would argue that content-based teaching, where the content is literally the content of the students’ lives and their perspectives, constitutes a pedagogy of voice that opens up the possibility for students to *be someone* in school and to learn.

In summary, although not highly valued as a genre in most secondary-school English syllabuses, journal-writing—and in particular personal narrative—constitutes one of the most powerful ways to engage in the teaching-learning process, especially for early- and intermediate-phase ESL learners (if not for all learners). Such writing provides learners with a voice and teachers with the possibility of reflective dialogue with students. To develop this argument, I look at journal entries written by recently arrived high school ESL students, focusing on the social and cultural perspectives of the writers, as well as on the linguistic features of the discourse. Two issues relating to teaching and learning are identified with regard to reflective writing processes. They are (a) language use and the representation of identity (voice in this context) for second-language speakers; and (b) the value of insights from journals for teachers and pedagogy. The first issue is addressed throughout the presentation of the data and analysis; I deal with the implications of the data for teacher and student learning in the final section of the article. First, I outline briefly the context and methodology of the study from which the data are drawn.

Context of the Study

The journal data used here are from a larger ethnographic study of 10 recently arrived high school ESL students (Miller, 2003), which focused on learning English and social identity. The conceptual framework of the study used sociocultural and discourse-based understandings of second-language acquisition and use. Participants whose writing is presented here are shown in Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

Data sources for the study included classroom observations, interviews in English and in the first language, students’ work samples, and the students’ diaries or journals. The journals, written in English over three months, provided important insights into the students’ development and use of English in classroom and social situations, along with understandings of their identity work. The journals were thus a rich data source for the research, but as an

Table 1

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Length of residence in Australia*</i>
Milena (F)	15	Bosnia	7 months
Tina (F)	15	Taiwan	13 months
Nora (F)	14	China	12 months
Alicia (F)	13	China	2 years

*at the time the journal data were written.

experienced ESL teacher, I also believe that such journals have great significance as a learning tool for both students and teachers, and I have used them often in intensive English programs. Students wrote about their classrooms, their teachers, social interactions and incidents, friendship, their perceptions of mainstream students, and their experiences of assessment.

Not all 10 students in the class were willing to engage in the writing process. Although students had the option to mask any sections they wished to keep private, one Bosnian girl argued that such writing was just too personal to share with me and that she was already maintaining a journal in Danish, her second language, so that she would not have time to do one in English. Ironically, she did in fact write a little, including a paragraph about why she was not going to write:

The real reason why I really don't feel like writing into this diary is because I know it is going to be published and a "Diary" is just to private, for me, to be published. I see my diary as alive person, and I would never let anybody but my 2-3 closest friends which are like sisters to me, read it. (Milena)

The data source used here was, therefore, written for a researcher rather than for a teacher. However, from the base line of my own experience as a teacher (van Lier, 1988) and the analysis itself, I propose that this kind of writing has real implications for teachers and for pedagogy. These are discussed in a section below. Eight of the students wrote regularly in their journals over a three-month period. Gabriel, a Salvadoran boy, wrote half a page every day for the entire three months, mostly factual summaries of his activities at home and school. Nora wrote 7,800 words, heart-rending narratives about daily life and relationships in an intimate style that reminded me of Anne Frank's famous diary. I have selected excerpts from several students that relate directly to the topic of identity and mainstream school experience, but have used Nora as a small case study in the latter part of the article. The length and narrative style of her pieces, although not necessarily repre-

sentative of all ESL students, reveal the potential of such writing. Nora always wrote this way, whereas four other (mostly female) students wrote similar but shorter entries (Miller, 2003).

Into the Mainstream: Second-Language Use and Voice in Reflective Writing

After their intensive English-language programs on arrival, the ESL students in this study moved into partial mainstream integration in high schools within six months, and fully into mainstream classes within 12 months. Some students commented on these transitions in their journals. The two extracts below are Nora's account of her exit interview before entering the mainstream and Tina's comment on her first day in mainstream classes. All names used are pseudonyms, and I have not changed any aspects of the journal entries.

Today my parents and I we had a entreveo, about I leave ESL class.

Before I afriad teachers will talk to my father I also talking to Alicia in the lesson, but unexpectedly, teacher didn't say any bad thing about me to my parents, and all the judgement was so good. I just heared "good student, nice work, hard work, excellent" and at last, Mrs. G said to my parents: "I like Nora, she was a good student, I wish she can stay here, but I knew that's so far away from your home came to school. I just can blessing she." I like the last sentence. It was so sweet. (Nora)

Today is the first day at school. I was so nervous. My first lesson was computer, I have some friends there, I felt better. Then, I had Science, English, finally Maths. I have friends in all of those lessons. I think I'll be good in mainstream. (Tina)

These are both good news stories. Nora was expecting her teacher to report to her father that she spent lots of class time chatting to her friend Alicia, and she was afraid of this. Expected negatives became positives, represented in the text mostly by direct quotations from her teacher, as well as the phrase "all the judgement was so good." It is highly likely that she used her electronic dictionary to find the words *judgement* and *unexpectedly*, but interestingly, she guessed at spelling the words *interview* and *afraid*. Nora positions the teacher as someone capable of judging and censoring, but in this case considerate and caring.

The important background to Tina's positive comment was that the friends she spoke of were in all cases from the ESL class. Her positive feelings about the mainstream classes cannot in this statement be separated from her relief at finding ESL peers in the computer, science, English, and math classes. Like several other students in this study, Tina highlights here the importance of social recognition and identity in mainstream classes. Before moving to data concerning specific mainstream subjects, it is pertinent to

comment on the degree of social isolation often faced by ESL students, which can happen in school, but can also be particularly severe during the school holidays. The following two extracts are again from Tina's journal. In the September vacation she remained at home. Writing at the start of these holidays, she wrote:

Ya! The holiday is beginning from today. I love holidays! Don't need to do any homework. Don't need to get up at 7.30 a.m. ... However, most of my friends went back to Taiwan. No-one could go shopping with me. I may stay at home the whole holiday!
I am so lonely! (Tina)

Her next entry was eight days later. She wrote,

I can't endure anymore. This holiday is too boring. Until now, I just went out one time- went to the library and return two books.
The weather begins hotter: my heart falls deeper. I start to hate holidays. But I still don't want to go to school! I want to ... want to ... go back TAIWAN. (Tina)

Note the shift in her first entry from "I love holidays" to "I am so lonely." We learn in the second extract that Tina's one outing had been to a place of silence, the library. Her repetition of "want to" and her choice of upper case for "TAIWAN" reveal her strong feelings at this time. She was in fact relieved to get back to school after these holidays, noting in her journal that at least there she would have "someone to talk to." Tina's use of affective language in these entries is significant and touching. Words and phrases such as *lonely*, *can't endure*, *boring*, *my heart falls deeper*, and *hate* are striking examples. The journal allows her to connect her experiences to her feelings about holidays and about her home country. It should be added that the use of English in her journal was the only time she used English at all during the two-week holiday period.

I turn now to specific comments written about English, social science, and assessment in the mainstream. Insights from these pieces relate primarily to assessment tasks, but also to the level of difficulty of mainstream work and to relationships with mainstream students.

I HATE Social Science

For ESL students, language-intensive subjects with rich and specific vocabularies such as English and social science pose particular problems. Texts are often lexically dense and cognitively demanding, and assessment tasks require students to have a highly developed vocabulary and to read and write lengthy texts. In the following excerpt from her journal, Alicia refers to the mainstream Year 8 social science class into which she had been integrated. She had told me that this was a hard subject because it had "a lot of language,

it has a lot of words." We can infer a contrast with subjects such as math, which have both symbols and words. In her journal Alicia quantified the problem of social science even further. She wrote,

Oh, NO! We need to write a Field Report, about [name of suburb]. Last week, I went to excursion with my m..... class, it was a year 8 Social Science Field Study. Their are three class went together, two of my friends from the other class are in my ESL class too! Anyway, we need to write the report, and it need 300 words, then we need to write other 300 words for risks to health, all together, I need to write 600 words for this a.....ment. And I need to have some research to do. I hate Social Science! I hate Social Science! I HATE Social Science! (Alicia)

In her diary entry we find two words that Alicia had clearly heard many times in English, yet did not know how to write, substituting instead just the first letters, *m* and *a*. The words are *mainstream* and *assignment*, words that are part of the taken-for-granted language of school, more often spoken than written, and that need to be taught explicitly to ESL learners. Alicia finds writing the assignment a daunting prospect, as shown by her repetition of "I hate Social Science," with an upper-case final "HATE."

The word or length problem also occurs in other subjects. Here is Tina's comment on her English homework.

Today, our English teacher gave us a terrible homework—read the novel up to chapter six—CHAPTER SIX!! Oh! My god, that has 98 pages and the words are so small like this a b c d e f g h i ... [written very small] I think I am better to stay in ESL, that's easier!! (Tina)

Her change of handwritten font was intentional, of course, and an important part of the meaning making in this entry. It could be argued that many English native speakers would find 98 pages daunting as well, but clearly ESL students require more time to read, as well as instructions on how to read.

In addition to producing assignments with many words in social science, ESL students face the challenge of delivering oral presentations, individually and in groups. In one group Year 9 Geography project, Tina was placed in a group of three to do research on an aspect of African culture. She wrote in her journal,

My group decided to do the Zulus of Africa. And I am doing the "Art" of Zulus. This is my first time doing something with Australians. I hope I could do as well as them. (Tina)

Consideration of the pronouns is revealing in this and the following journal entries by Tina. Although she uses *them* and *Australians* to refer to the mainstream students (those she wants to do as well as), it is *my group*, and she

has a specific role in it. Tina had arrived in Australia 13 months previously and had been at Taylor High (pseudonym) for seven months when she wrote this. In other words, in over half a year at the school this oral project was the first time she had ever worked with Australian peers. To her it was worthy of noting in her journal, and it signalled a new range of practices, both socially and linguistically. Later she writes of the project's outcome.

Today is the due day of our geography assinment and oral. I was the second speaker of our group. I was so nervous and my voice was shaking. My group used fourteen minutes to described the culture of Zulus. When we finished the class, we went to ask Mr L what result did we get. It's a A-. We thought it's a pretty good result. (Tina)

In this excerpt there is no mention of *they* or *them*. The cohesion of the group is expressed by the use of first-person pronouns throughout. Tina had often expressed the perception that teachers and some students discriminated against Asian students, those she termed *black hairs* (Miller, 2003). She had frequently represented herself as different from the Australian mainstream students, and in a negative sense. In this light the above journal entry about working with Australians, and her membership in this group, is both positive and significant.

Speaking Out—The English Oral

Several students wrote about oral presentations in English. In the following excerpts from Tina and Nora, a number of issues are raised.

Today we had a English Role Play. I was working with Sarah, a Australian girl. We are doing a girl and a boy are fight for a dog. We just prepared for ten minutes. I was so scared when I was in front of the class. We finished it about 1 minutes. and Ms Ball said I was doing very well. I was glad and I know I was doing my utmost. (Tina)

Today we had an English Oral ... I was working with Sarah and David. We are doing a TV interview of two girls—Lara and Pearl who just save their sister from a fire accident. I was the interviewer. Because we had three members in our group, so we need to speak for three minutes. However, we just speak for two minutes and forty-seven seconds. So we didn't got a very high mark. I got a B-. (Tina)

Today we had lecture about "book talk." I very worried. In front of the students and teachers I very nervous. Before I stayed home recite from memory to my father. That's very fluent. But at critical moment I all the forget. So I got C+. I very feel unwell. (Nora)

Tina again mentions that her partner Sarah is Australian, but we also see Tina inscribing herself in these excerpts as a legitimate mainstream class

member, joining her voice to those of others, focusing on the zealous time-keeping that often characterizes such presentations, yet feeling she has done her best and been acknowledged, the word *utmost* almost certainly found in her electronic dictionary. Nora's piece highlights the problems arising for ESL students from the sustained and structured oral presentation genre. Standing in front of other students and the teacher is nerve-racking, with all class members waiting for these small and often previously unheard voices to emerge. Her practice run, recited by heart to her father, was "very fluent," but how well she describes the real thing: "at critical moment I all the forget." The judgment is definitive, and she took her C+ personally. Insights from these journals about mainstream subject assessment practices are important for teachers of ESL students. On the one hand, we note the importance of integrating these students with others in group work, but at the same time oral presentations can be confronting and stressful.

Writing to the Teacher—The Very Bad Mark

In the following excerpt, Nora narrates the story of her result on a test on current affairs, a "news test". She refers to her *form class teacher* as her "Phone teacher," another of these words that are used orally but never spelled out or explained for ESL students: *form* to *phone* is a phonetic approximation, how Nora heard this word.

Today is a bad day.

In this morning my Phone teacher gave back to us "News test." I got a very very very VERY BAD bad mark. D+. I never got this mark before.

Maybe I'm bad, But I don't think I'm bad like that! I think this test was not quite equitable, because I'm lose two lessons on a week. Last

Thursday I'm not in the class, and on Friday the teacher told us we have a test. I asked teacher: "Can I get that paper about News?" Teacher said she don't got any one left. So I can't have a good mark. (Maybe it isn't real reason.)

This afternoon when I came home, I very heartbroken. I'm cried, long time, then I wrote a letter to my Phone teacher. I told she what I'm fell. Why I haven't got a good mark, and I said willing getting better. I want my Phone teacher can give me one more chance to look at me.

I like think tomorrow will getting better. Every thing will getting better.
(Nora)

The structure of this piece reveals Nora's characteristic opening abstract, followed by a complication, elaboration of events and her affective response to these, then a resolution and philosophical coda. On the test she has received a D+, a "very very very VERY BAD bad mark." the repetition and capitalization conveying her unhappiness, which culminated in floods of tears after school. However, in her diary, and after the heat of the moment,

Nora recounts and analyzes the event, drawing as she does so often on her dramatic resources: there are tears, catharsis, and resolution as she describes her pragmatic and empowering response in the form of a letter to her teacher. She specifies three elements included in the letter, namely, her feelings, her account of the result (losing lessons and having no sheet), and an assertion of her willingness to improve. She then provides the rationale for writing to the teacher, whom she wants to have “one more chance to look at me.” That is, one more chance to be considered as something or someone other than a D+.

The level of identity representation in this text is powerful, and the reader has clear insight into what went on, how it affected Nora, and how she responded. This excerpt also provides an example of Nora’s agency at work. In over 20 years of classroom teaching, I have seen many students receive bad marks on tests and have heard many complain, but I have never received such a letter. Nora attempted to inscribe her identity via an official discourse, a letter to the teacher. In language terms, this was an authentic, communicative, and instrumental use of English, and I knew that she would have had difficulty representing herself as cogently through speaking.

Nora told dozens of engaging stories in her journal, stories about a robbery at her parents’ noodle bar, the gift of a Tamagochi electronic “baby” and what happened to it in class, her new computer, working in the noodle bar, her parents who “imprisoned” her one minute and showed “infinite compassion” the next, the discovery of boys in her own and in her best friend’s life, falling asleep on the bus, note-passing in class, boring holidays, and many more. In the next and final journal excerpt, I present her story of a phone call to a boy on her friend’s behalf. The girls were 13 and 14 at the time, and both telephones and boys were beginning to loom large in their lives.

It Was Just a Dream

Nora made a phone call to a boy on Alicia’s behalf, which went wrong when someone else listened in at the boy’s home. Note her self-correction of the text (strike-through words), and again her use of narrative structure and reported speech, her accounts of social interaction, and her resolution of the emotional effect of the incident. In this excerpt, *packed* = *picked* and *set* = *sad/upset*.

~~In the~~ Tonight Alicia rang me and she asked me to ring a boy who in our class. I ready said no, but she always asked. I just can say Yes, and I rang that boy, somebody packed up the telephone. I asked: “May I speak to XX? And ~~nothing~~ no-one ~~aswer~~ reply me. I waited for a long time. Then XX ~~speaked~~ ~~spokd~~ spoke to me, and I asked who is the first person packed up the telephone? And I said, that person doesn’t have politeness, and I don’t know who packed up the other telephone and reproved me. I’m was very set and stoped the telephone. Rang back to

Alice told she what happen I done, and cried. Alice said that boy will say sorry to me. I don't think so! So we got a bet.

[written the next day]

In that bet, I lost.

In the second lesson when I go to Maths class, he said sorry to me, but I said, "Why you said sorry to me?" "Because yesterday night!" "What happen ~~for~~ yesterday night?" I asked he, he said "Last night my brother reproved you." I with a laugh and said: "What? I don't know what you mean."

Then I'm to Maths class. I don't knew what's happen to the next, and I don't care about it. I just think that was a ~~drawn~~ dream, no-one need care about it. And I would like people to think nothing occur last night. I told Alice what think about me and what I'm feeling. I think it was just a ~~drawn~~ dream. She said: "Some things were occur in the world, no body can forget, you must ~~think~~ confront the fact." And she don't think I'm doing all right. Maybe, maybe not right at the all. I like to think it just a dream. I forget it. (Nora)

We recognize some familiar behavior of teenage girls here, but there is a sophistication in the telling that breathes life into this account. We hear the words and feel for her attempt to tough it out, as if nothing had happened, as if the eavesdropping brother had not insulted her. In terms of the writing, she monitors herself, correcting several errors, and again uses her electronic dictionary (for vocabulary like *reprove*, *politeness*, *dream*, *confront*). Her friend's line about confronting the facts seems somewhat harsh in the circumstances, but they had a history of arguing and Nora recounted these arguments at length in her journal (Miller, 2003). She corrected *dream* twice and the third time got it right. This is language acquisition in the making. She even adds expression such as *with a laugh*. I find she engages the reader on the level of the narrative itself, but if a teacher wished to diagnose areas of grammar for revision or to identify the types of errors that Nora's writing still showed at this point, there would be scope to do this also. More critically, her achievement deserves to be acknowledged here in that she was able to represent herself at this quite advanced level after less than year in the country and with minimal prior English. The narrative also had a sequential plot line, recognizable characters, dialogue, and a reflective resolution.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Reflective journal-writing opens up communicative space for English language learners, which is often unavailable in mainstream classrooms and creates a range of opportunities for teachers to engage in the situated meaning-making process that lies at the heart of all learning. Although such writing presupposes reciprocity in the process of teaching and learning, I focus first on student learning and then on teacher learning.

Reflective journals have a number of advantages as a genre and format for ESL students. Briefly, this study indicates that such journals provide students with:

1. a communication context that takes the heat off the “speaker,” a text they can write in their own time;
2. a choice of topics and contexts that are meaningful to them;
3. a voice that is not often available for use in ESL or mainstream classes; students are often silent/silenced in class due to anxiety about their sense of limited proficiency or social pressure;
4. a context of acquisition rather than learning (Miller 2003; 2004b);
5. creative freedom to use text, drawing, and pictures;
6. a sense of ownership of and investment in the writing and the physical journal itself;
7. opportunities for vocabulary acquisition and practice of forms;
8. the means to connect experience, reflection, and feelings, thereby engaging affect in the learning process;
9. opportunities to self-correct and redraft;
10. an understanding of the links between spoken interactions and written accounts; and
11. the chance to communicate with the teacher in ways that would be extremely hard to do face to face, especially where affect is involved.

The data used above provide ample examples of these aspects of reflective writing and serve as evidence for a form of writing that could enrich the language curriculum and provide important insights for teachers, which are elaborated below.

Teacher Learning

In addition to the advantages listed above, journals serve three broad purposes that are important for student learning, but especially for teacher learning. First, they tap into student identities in ways that are critical for a meaningful pedagogy that reinscribes “culture, language, identity, intellect and imagination” in our image of the minority child (Cummins, 2003, p. 42). That is, providing space for learners to represent and negotiate their identities allows them to display instances of agency and to explore their relationships to others. Giroux (1992) reminds us of the imperative to work toward learning that goes beyond the learning of content to an appreciation of cultural practices “that offer students a sense of identity, place, and hope” (p. 205). This sense is integral to his notion of “border pedagogy,” which he writes,

suggests not simply opening diverse cultural histories and spaces to students, it also means understanding how fragile identity is as it moves into borderlands crisscrossed with a variety of languages, experiences, and voices. There are no unified subjects here, only students whose

voices and experiences intermingle with the weight of particular histories that will not fit into the master narrative of a monolithic culture. (p. 209)

Although reflective journals are not a genre that is normally valued in schools, they provide insights that are simply not available to teachers elsewhere. Revaluing such writing has implications not only for learning, but also for reinscribing ESL students as culturally, linguistically, and socially competent. It is a way of helping students to "value their own voices," as Valdes (2004, p. 125) suggests. Nora, who often got the mechanics of English wrong, nevertheless writes skillfully about her everyday life and shows the reader repeatedly how identity and difference are constructed through discourse. I have read many hundreds of student texts with fewer grammatical anomalies, but also far fewer points of interest and engagement for the reader. In other words, she reveals in these texts the makings of a fine writer; yet how are teachers to discover and nurture this potential if such writing has no value in the curriculum or is dismissed as "ESL stuff," all "back to front and unmarkable," as one teacher described Nora's work to me.

The second thing teachers need to understand from this writing is related to a communicative approach to language pedagogy, which should tap into students' identities as a primary resource in the making of meaning and language use. Acquiring a new language necessitates access to communicative events that are essential for the learner to practice and to learn (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Savignon, 1991). The texts presented here are significant communicative events, which allow students to connect and process their experiences, thoughts, and feelings through authentic language use. These students were extending the discourse through the writing process itself, looking up words in the dictionary, bringing the text to life with dialogue, practicing tenses, shaping the narrative, and experimenting with forms. For most of the students there was a great investment of time and effort in the writing, which is critical for acquiring a new language. Recycling and reinventing the language continually, especially in a regular routinized type of writing, has enormous potential to help students develop and maintain language proficiency. As Knapp and Watkins (2005) point out, "The bodily dimension of writing, that is sitting and labouring to construct a text, which is habituated technique in proficient writers, is generally taken for granted within contemporary literacy pedagogy" (p. 81). Journal-writing provides such "habituated technique." For some ESL students there are precious few opportunities to use English outside the classroom (Miller, 2003). Journal-writing is one such opportunity. Finally, we observe in several excerpts that such writing also provides a link between basic personal language and more complex literate forms.

The third broad area for teachers to consider with these journals is the opening up of a space to learn and to engage with students directly through

input and feedback. Dialogue journals, for example, in which teachers write a response to the student entry provide a space for nonthreatening authentic communication and mutual learning. In one study of dialogue journals (Holmes & Moulton, 1997), students reported an increase in motivation and fluency in English. Journals allow teachers to gauge important aspects of literacy, with some attention to grammar or content, but more important, to understand and respond to students' perspectives and needs, and to know their students better.

Data excerpts used here provide insight into a number of school practices that are problematic for ESL students. These include anxiety about transition and change in school and about assessment, degrees of social isolation during holidays, the problem of length in texts and tasks, and aspects of cohesion and the sense of achievement resulting from group work in the mainstream. They show what and how students understand and where the gaps lie.

Conclusion

Even in a digital screen-based culture, writing is "still the most important means of access to the vast repository of knowledge of literate cultures" (Kress, 2005, p. 7). Although of immense value to ESL students in the language acquisition process, the reflective journal-writing shown here also reveals many lessons for teachers. These include the importance of affect in learning, which so often results not only in an intensity of engagement, but also in the intellectual and cognitive work needed to develop literacy (Beynon, 2004). Yet such texts are minority discourses that remain outside the official discourses of school. For this reason alone they are worthy objects of analysis and research (Luke, 1995-1996). With students' permission, they are also wonderfully authentic models for linguistic analysis in the classroom. Such texts should not be judged against native speakers' standards (Cook, 2002), but used and valued for the insights they provide into representation of the identity and experiences of students, discourse acquisition and literacy, and for the space they open for genuine communication between teachers and students, and perhaps between students and their peers. They also offer teachers and students a means to move from writer-based to reader-based prose, perhaps working collaboratively on the sharing, editing, and transformation of text.

Student journals are more than stories of the students' lives. They exemplify authentic language use in a truly communicative approach to pedagogy, transformed by reinscribing the students as learners and individuals, competent and performing at the best level they can in the process of language acquisition. Such writing does more than provide teachers with evidence of fluency and accuracy. Even a simple focus on pronoun use in Tina's texts reveals an emerging sense of group identity and cohesion, and

Nora's texts show flair and creativity that need to be nurtured and valued. The journal is where students show where they are in their learning and social lives, where they can experiment with language and gain essential practice. In a transformative pedagogy of voice, the diverse social languages present in the classroom are valued as a primary resource for learning and teaching, and the practical activity of journal-writing is one way this can happen.

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The Author

Jenny Miller is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education in Monash University. Her research and publications are in the areas of language acquisition, identity, and qualitative methodology in applied linguistics. Her book *Audible Difference: ESL and Social Identity* (2003) explores the politics of speaking and identity for immigrant students in high schools.

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